

Ovid and abortion

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Ovid is known as a cheeky chappy whose poetry pushes at the boundaries of decorum. In three of his poems in *Amores* 2, however, he raises the serious issue of abortion. Ian Fielding puts what he has to say back into its ancient context.

Roman love elegy presents a private, first-person account of the poet's hopes, dreams, fears, and desires. He documents, in painstaking detail, the emotional and even bodily torment he endures in pursuit of his mistress – a pursuit which, more often than not, comes to nothing. Ovid, *Amores* 2.12, is one of those rare examples of the genre in which the elegist actually succeeds in getting his mistress into bed. You would be mistaken, though, if you thought that, after such a long and frustrating wait, Ovid would be eager to tell all about the pleasures he has enjoyed. He is certainly triumphant: Corinna, he boasts, is in his arms (*'in nostro est... Corinna sinu'* line 2), in spite of the best efforts of her husband (*'uir'* line 3) and her guardian (*'custos'* line 3) to keep her under lock and key. Still, for all his euphoria, the poem contains no references to the physical act of sex. Instead, Ovid reprises the metaphor of *militia amoris* (the 'warfare of love') that he made famous in *Amores* 1.9, and celebrates his 'conquest', crowing that the 'spoils' he has taken are 'without bloodshed' (*'sanguine praeda caret'* line 6), and his 'victory' was won 'without slaughter' (*'sine caede'* line 27). Mission accomplished for the love elegist, then.

In the cold light of day

But... what happens next? The elegist's master-plan does not usually account for what comes after he has carved that new notch on his bedpost. The story does not always end there, however, and *Amores* 2.13 brings a reminder that sexual gratification can have grave consequences. Ovid has found out that he got Corinna pregnant, and her attempts to terminate this pregnancy have left her in a critical condition (*'in dubio uitae'* *Am.* 2.13.2). This revelation is all the more shocking because Ovid tends to be thought of as the least serious of the love elegists – an actor staging a love affair with a woman who, we often suspect, does not really exist. Here, though, his ironic portrayal of the elegiac lover pushes us to think about

some of the unpleasant realities lying beneath the genre's romantic fictions. As he appeals to Isis, the Egyptian goddess who was worshipped in Rome (*Am.* 2.13.7–18), and promises offerings to Ilithyia, goddess of childbirth, if she will help Corinna recover (*Am.* 2.13.19–26), we are perhaps prompted to remember similar prayers in earlier love elegy. Tibullus complains that Delia seems to have forgotten how he had performed sacred rites when she 'lay exhausted with gloomy sickness' (*'tristi morbo defessa iaceres'* *Tib.* 1.5.9), and Propertius tells Cynthia to thank Isis for saving her life after she had been ill (*Prop.* 2.28.61). Having read *Amores* 2.13, we might look back and wonder what exactly had caused these women to suffer their mysterious maladies.

The ancient Greeks and Romans employed many different methods of controlling female fertility. It is well known that doctors taking the Hippocratic oath swore not to administer an 'abortive pessary' (*pepson phthorion*) to their patients, but nonetheless, these and other forms of treatment seem to have been common in antiquity. Surgical intervention was extremely dangerous, and thus in most cases only a last resort; drugs, by comparison, offered a slightly less risky recourse. The Greek physician Soranus, who wrote his *Gynaecology* in Rome about a century after Ovid, distinguishes between contraceptives (*atokia*) and abortifacients (*phthoria*), and advises that it is safer to stop conception from happening in the first place than to carry out an abortion later (*Gyn.* 1.60). Although he describes a number of herbal remedies that can prevent or terminate pregnancy, he warns that these can have harmful side-effects, and should be avoided (*Gyn.* 1.63). Other medical practitioners in Rome do not appear to have been so concerned for their patients' health, however. Soranus' approximate contemporary, the satirist Juvenal, sneers that the low birth rate among the city's wealthy and sexually promiscuous upper classes is a result of the many 'techniques' and

'medicines' (*'artes... medicamina'* *Juv.* 6.595) of the midwife, 'who makes women sterile and takes contracts to kill human beings in the belly' (*'quae steriles facit atque homines in uentre necandos / conducit'* *Juv.* 6.596–7).

Male and female perspectives

So why would a Roman woman want to have an abortion, when it was possible she could end up paying with her life? For Ovid – at least in his role as a typical elegiac lover – it is hard to comprehend. At the beginning of *Amores* 2.14, he returns to the martial imagery of *Amores* 2.12, and questions what good it does women to be spared from fighting in wars, if they are going to 'suffer wounds from weapons of their own' (*'suis patiuntur uulnera telis'* *Am.* 2.14.3). Is it worth putting yourself through such an ordeal, he asks, 'so that your belly will be without the fault of wrinkles' (*'ut careat rugarum crimine uenter'* *Am.* 2.14.7)? This is an explanation the love poet would find easy to understand: after all, Corinna's 'flat belly' (*'planus... uenter'* *Am.* 1.5.21) was one part of her body that Ovid found especially arousing after ripping off her dress in *Amores* 1.5; and when he offers sex tips to the female readers of his *Ars amatoria*, he recommends that a woman 'whose womb childbirth has marked with wrinkles' (*'cui rugis uterum Lucina notauit'* *Ars am.* 3.785) should position herself with her back to her lover. Soranus reports that some doctors refused to perform abortions on women who only wanted to preserve their beauty (*Gyn.* 1.60), but as we never hear the other side of the story from Roman women who actually had abortions, there is no way of corroborating the suppositions of these male authors.

How might this situation look from Corinna's point of view? Let's assume that she did not have a medical condition of the sort that Soranus says would make it dangerous for her to carry a baby to term. Would Ovid – who, in keeping with the love elegist's code, seems to value women for little else besides sex – be likely to make a reliable father for her child? It is worth noting that he does not display much regard for his potential parental obligations in these poems. 'In one person, spare two!' (*'in una parce duobus'*

Am. 2.13.15), he pleads in his prayer to Isis – but in case you were wondering whether he meant Corinna and their unborn baby, he adds, ‘you will give life to my mistress, and she to me’ (*‘nam uitam dominae tu dabis, illa mihi’* *Am.* 2.13.16). And what would happen if Corinna’s *uir* (‘husband’ *Am.* 2.12.3), whom Ovid was so pleased with himself for outwitting, found out that she was pregnant? Under a law passed by the emperor Augustus in 18 B.C., a charge of adultery would leave both Ovid and Corinna liable to a significant loss of property, and possibly even banishment from Rome. There is some evidence that the same legislation, which was intended to promote marriage and the growth of Rome’s elite population, also made it illegal for women to use contraceptives or abortifacients. On balance, though, it might have been easier for Corinna to cover up an abortion than an unexpected pregnancy.

Future concerns

The issue of the right to life before birth was highly controversial in antiquity, as it still is today. In *Amores* 2.14, however, this is not an issue of particular concern. Ovid’s objection to Corinna’s abortion is, rather, that she had taken it upon herself to decide the future of his family line. This anxiety about women assuming control of their own reproductive capabilities is one that Ovid shares with many Roman men of his time – including the emperor Augustus. As Ovid points out to Corinna at *Am.* 2. 14. 17–18, if the goddess Venus had acted in this way when she was pregnant with her (illegitimate) son Aeneas, the world would have been deprived of Aeneas’ descendants, the Caesars. We might be surprised to see Ovid, whose love elegies seem to advocate a more liberal attitude to sexuality than was normally acceptable in Roman society, reading from the same script as Augustus, author of laws prohibiting extramarital sex. But, again, we should perhaps be careful about identifying Ovid the author too closely with the character he plays in his poems. In bringing up the topic of abortion, as we have seen, his *Amores* provoke questions about differing male and female experiences that tend to be passed over in earlier elegy. Ironically, then, Ovid shows that sexually liberated women are just as much of a threat to the elegists’ sense of masculine authority as to the traditional Roman morality the poets claim to oppose.

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